

National Employer Service

Case Study: National Grid Plc

The NES Case Study Series

This series of case studies is about employers who contract with the National Employer Service (NES) at the LSC. Researchers at York Consulting LLP gathered the information for the case studies by speaking to senior staff in each company and trainers, tutors, assessors and employees involved with NES funded programmes.

Each case study briefly describes the company and the training programme funded. The focus is on the key challenges the company has faced in relation to the programme and how the company overcame these. In some instances, the programme itself is a response to challenges facing the company as a whole.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily represent QIA's views.

About the National Grid

National Grid is one of the largest utility companies and is “dedicated to being the world’s premier network utility. National Grid core skills lie primarily in the management of large and complex energy delivery networks.

National Grid runs an apprentice programme and accepts around 85 new apprentices per annum, according to business need. The annual cohort of 85 apprentices is split roughly 60/40 between the gas and electric areas of the business.

Challenge: Selecting the Right Candidates

The apprenticeship programme allows the National Grid to develop technically proficient engineers, who understand the company and the way it works. The National Grid recruits apprentices for specific positions i.e. gas engineers, rather than recruiting “*generalists*” and then allowing them to specialise later in their Apprenticeship. This places an added emphasis on the recruitment process to ensure that they get “*the right people for the job*”. The National Grid tracks the progress of apprentices for five years after they have finished the programme.

The business benefits of the Apprenticeship programme are only realised in the medium to long term – “*it is three years into their roles before apprentices become genuinely productive for the business*”. Therefore, National Grid recognise that “*getting it right (recruitment) first time*” pays dividends commercially by ensuring that National Grid only gets committed and capable candidates for the programme.

Response: Utilising a Broad Range of Assessment Tools

There is a minimum academic requirement of four GCSEs; however, the National Grid recognised that this was not always a reliable indicator of academic ability.

To get a more rounded view of applicants’ skills and capabilities, the National Grid uses a combination of practical and psychometric tests to improve their recruitment process.

The recruitment process is completed in three stages:

- initial selection from application forms;
- telephone interview selection to reduce the list to 10%;
- candidates attend the assessment centre for:
 - interview;
 - manual dexterity test; and
 - extensive psychometric testing.

Challenge: Developing Morale and a Sense of Team

A National Grid apprenticeship lasts 36 months, and includes an induction process, on-the-job learning and off-site learning at one of National Grid's bespoke learning centres. It is important that apprentices are engaged in their programme of learning as early as possible. A key part of induction in the organisation is building a sense of team and developing team-working skills.

Response: Team Building Week

The induction programme for the Apprenticeship lasts six weeks and includes attendance at a one-week residential development session at an outward bound centre in Cumbria to develop personal and team skills. The team building week is intended to build team spirit and develop morale.

Challenge: Consolidating the Learning

Since the programme is relatively long in duration, a crucial element is to encourage learners to consolidate their learning and develop strategies to do this throughout the programme.

Response: Self Reflection and Feedback Sessions

At the end of the six-week induction, all apprentices are required to give a presentation on "*what you have learnt to date*". This incorporates the practice of self reflection to consolidate learning as well as developing presentation skills.

Challenge: Developing Rounded Company Individuals

Many of the training elements were delivered by external providers in the past. However, National Grid recognised that this limited the type of training they were able to provide to employees. While the technical training was beneficial, it did not, necessarily, develop rounded individuals who had an understanding of using their skills in a working environment and integrating them into company practice or culture. Also, it limited National Grid's ability to respond proactively to changes in skills and practice and for some elements of training it proved difficult to find a competent provider.

Response: In-House Delivery

While the overhead costs are higher, National Grid recognise that the shift from college-led to internal Apprenticeship delivery means National Grid can develop technically competent staff who also understand and appreciate the company culture.

Challenge: Selecting the Right Mentors

On-the-job mentors are a key element of the programme for National Grid. They are responsible for monitoring the progress of apprentices' on-the-job performance. Previously mentors were field managers, but it was acknowledged that management level staff, in most cases, were not always the best people to communicate with apprentices.

Response: Using field level staff, not management level staff

Wherever possible, National Grid uses former apprentices and craft staff to act as mentors. Each on-the-job mentor is trained in mentoring skills and other areas such as inclusion and diversity. Every three months mentors get together for a re-refresh on procedures and to review the progress of apprentices. Changing mentors from management level staff to field staff has led to an improvement in communication between mentors and apprentices.

Challenge: Ensuring Apprentices Get the Right Experience

Apprentices' on-the-job progress is monitored using a logbook, which apprentices are responsible for keeping up to date. The logbook serves two purposes: to keep track of employee progress and also to ensure that apprentices are getting the variety of work experience required to complete the NVQ and the Apprenticeship. It is critical that the logbook is up-to-date and accurate.

Response: Performance related pay

Every ten weeks apprentices have a review meeting to assess their progress during which their logbook and mentor reports are reviewed. Performance at the ten weekly review process feeds directly into a milestone framework. The milestone framework is used as the basis on which pay and bonus increases are decided. The pay and progression of apprentices is directly related to their NVQ performance and completion of their performance logbook. This incentivises apprentices to keep their log books up-to-date.